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Reflections on Educational Commitments in the Congregation of the Holy Spirit

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John Assey, C.S.Sp.

Fr. John Assey, C.S.Sp. attended primary and secondary schools in Moshi (Tanzania) between 1971 and 1986 when he joined the Holy Ghost minor seminary at Usa River, Arusha. He was one of the Tanzanian Province pioneers at the Holy Ghost Seminary, Njiro (Philosophy) and at TANGAZA, Nairobi, Kenya (Theology). In 1994, he received a mission in Uganda, till 2000 when he went for further studies at the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome, 2001 -2004, where he attained a Masters degree in the Sciences of Education (Pedagogy for Schools), majoring in school administration. After his studies he became the head of the Kigoma School, Tanzania. He is currently a Manager at Tengeru Boys Secondary school in Arusha, Tanzania.

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REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATIONAL COMMITMENTS IN THE CONGREGATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT¹

Introduction

A meeting of twelve Spiritans, representatives of Spiritan formal and alternative educational works around the globe and five members of the general council took place on 3 – 9 July 2011, at the generalate in Rome. The meeting was called by the general council to reflect on the mission of our Congregation with regard to education to help us to work more effectively and to prepare a contribution for the General Chapter in 2012. We do not seek to set out a strict and unbending coordination of our works of education, in the sense of a Spiritan Service of Education, but rather a consensus on the spirituality that should be common to all aspects of Spiritan education.

This is the second conference of Spiritan educators worldwide to be convened by the general council after that of 1991 at Duquesne. The Maynooth Chapter that followed the Duquesne Symposium called on Spiritans to develop the educational mission, “to make young people aware of the problems of poverty and unjust structures in their society and the world at large.” The Chapter encouraged Spiritans to work with lay people in a collaborative ministry. The training of confreres as educators was seen as important (Maynooth 2. 13-16). The objective of our meeting is quite rightly to go beyond what Maynooth had to say, or, at least, to propose concrete means to ensure that our involvement in education will correspond faithfully to our Spiritan charism. Twenty years after these conclusions there has been considerable growth in the importance of education within the Spiritan mission. The variety of Spiritan involvement in education that emerged from the reports was encouraging.

In his introductory talk to the meeting, the Councilor for Education stated: “You have been called together to engage in a reflection on an important aspect of the mission of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in the world. Although the specific mission of our Congregation is not to work in educational enterprises, a large number of our members are engaged in education and continue to work in that area as a means of fulfilling this mission.”



George Boran, C.S.Sp.

George Boran, C.S.Sp. was ordained in Dublin, on July 7, 1968. Since 1969 he has worked as a missionary in Brazil and Latin America. George is an international specialist in the area of youth leadership training and youth ministry. He has given conferences and courses in different countries in Latin America, Europe, Africa, United States, and in the Ukraine. He has worked as National Youth Director for the Brazilian Bishops' Conference (CNBB) and on a Commission for youth for the Latin American Bishops (CELAM). His doctoral thesis, in Fordham University, was on the role of successful Adult Youth Ministers in Latin America and the United States. George is the author of important books on working with young people that have been published in Portuguese, Spanish, English, German and Ukrainian. He is founder and coordinator of the National Youth Training Center, CCJ, in Sao Paulo and is currently a member of a Commission for Formation material for youth for the Brazilian Bishops' Conference (CNBB).

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Objectives of our Work Session

This period of reflection was organized to help the Congregation to *define its educational policy*, to speak in a special way to our involvements at primary, secondary and third level. We need to define better the **philosophy (the "ethos")** of our Congregation for our educational works. The aim was to examine four issues:

- To analyze the present situation of Spiritan involvement in education.
- Why and in what circumstances ought we as Spiritans to become involved in establishing educational works or participate in them? What is the motivation which drives us to do this?
- What results do we expect when we become involved in educational work? What are the means to attain these results (style of life, teaching staff...)?
- What directives and/or advice do we wish to give to Spiritans with regard to educational works?

Methodology of the Meeting

The meeting was conducted in the form of shared experiences where the participants were both listeners and experts. Participants presented individual reports on the situation of Spiritan educational works in different geographical areas of the world. The reports followed a sequence of topics that had been circulated previously. After the reports a methodology of group work and plenary sessions was adopted to study the different issues relating to our works. A redaction commission made up of George Boran and John Assey helped to organize and systematize the principal ideas that emerged during the five day meeting. The following sequence of steps guided the group work and plenary sessions:

- From what we have heard, what are the most *fundamental issues* for education?
- What are the *criteria or motivations* that should guide us in our involvement or our disengagement?
- What *convictions and guidelines* do we want to present to the General Chapter concerning the educational works in the Congregation?
- *Elaboration of the text* to be presented to the General Chapter.

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The statement in one of the reports that, “education can be one of the most powerful weapons against poverty, ignorance and disease by helping people to improve their lives” struck a chord among the participants. For this reason all Spiritans who have Catholic schools within the boundaries of their parishes are encouraged to be supportive of these works.

The Spiritan Charism and Educational Works

Claude Poullart des Places established his work out of concern for the poorest, “for humble and laborious ministries where the Church does not have workers” (biographical note on Claude Francois Poullart des Places,) and was involved in seminary education. Libermann is not generally regarded as an instigator of educational work. However, he was quick to notice that one could not work for the emancipation of the poor without working for their education (N.D, VIII, p. 248, N.D, IX, p. 44). Over the years, many schools have been established by Spiritans. Many other alternative educational works were founded and are still in existence as we try to respond with the necessary creativity to the needs of the peoples among whom we work. Spiritan engagements in education remain very numerous. We wish to fulfil the mission of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and to be faithful to our charism. This invites us to take a look at what the Spiritan Rule of Life has to say on the subject. Our mission in the Church is described in Article 4: “The evangelization of the poor (cf. Luke 4, 18) is our purpose (cf. N. D. XIII, 170).” To become involved on behalf of the poorest is to wish to empower and enable them to play the role in society which is theirs according to the will of God (cf. SRL 14). One of the privileged means of achieving this end is through works of education, as Libermann very clearly understood.

A paragraph from the report on the Duquesne Symposium in 1991 summarizes our experience and gives us a sense of continuity and evolution: “The scope and variety of Spiritan involvement in education came as a surprise to many. Of particular significance was the acceptance and even the stress on the importance of non-formal education. Gratifying, too, was the spirit in which educators resolved to implement the orientation of SRL in the educational apostolates, especially provisions regarding to Justice and the poor.”

Our Convictions with Regard to Spiritan Educational Works

We reaffirm educational works as an important priority in the Congregation. Spiritans need to discuss and define a **vision** and an **ethos** for our educational works. In any organization, vision and ethos are central to its identity, because they give it

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inspiration and direction. Vision and ethos are two sides of the same coin and are fundamental for the Spiritan identity of our works.

A vision refers to the purpose of the organization, to where we want to get in the future, what direction we are going. Vision will include some of the following elements: integral development, empowerment, people being subjects of their own destiny, liberation from poverty, educating for citizenship, quality and excellence, passing on a value system in the midst of a crisis of values in a world where there is an erosion of human dignity and where people can be driven by a culture of materialism and greed (pop stars, possessions, gadgets...).

The ethos is the philosophy, the spirituality, our way of doing things, the climate in which we work, the atmosphere, the culture. Ethos refers to how the vision is lived out in daily practice. Important elements are: the spirit of “*cor unum et anima una*” (one heart and one mind), being there for oneself, for others and for the world; genuinely Catholic in an open and non-fundamentalist way that is refreshing.

This vision and ethos need to be expressed in the mission statement of each of our educational works.

Our educational works seek to answer the most urgent needs of people....

Our commitment in education cannot be reduced to our presence only in formal structures such as schools. Spiritans are involved in education in many contexts and different situations. Our educational works seek to answer the *most urgent needs of people*, keeping in mind the option for the poor and the difficulty in getting workers as expressed in SRL 4. Although schools need to be financially viable, the establishment of schools to raise money will be avoided as it undermines the Spiritan charism. Other alternatives should be sought.

A clear option for the most vulnerable and the materially poor.

Our educational works should be driven by two options:

- A clear option for the most vulnerable and the materially poor (SRL 4).
- An option to contribute to the building and presentation of a liberating vision of *faith and the Church which is relevant* to people strongly influenced by modern and postmodern cultures. A more secularist attitude advances rapidly also in large cities in developing countries.

Our educational works should be concerned with:

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- *The personal, academic and integral development* of its pupils.
- *Forming people as citizens to build a better society.* This latter aspect involves creating awareness of the deeper structural causes of social ills so that people cannot be naively manipulated by unscrupulous leaders. It also involves education for justice and peace and integrity of creation issues and the need to strengthen *civil society*.
- *The development of a faith that gives dynamism for transforming ourselves and society* in the light of the values of the Reign of God.

We need to get acquainted with and respect the wide diversity of educational works in the Congregation and not impose a unified model on all. We seek to evaluate and renew our educational works on a continuous basis by looking at strengths, weaknesses, challenges, opportunities, and the need for adaptation where that arises. Sometimes the work evolves and we find that we have gone away from the original motivation and abandoned our charism. We should leave when we become irrelevant with regard to our charism. Another option is to find new motivation and a new focus that is in line with our charism.

We see our work with lay people, in a spirit of collaborative ministry, as a priority. Lay people participate in mission because of a direct call from Jesus Christ through baptism, not primarily because of a mandate from the priest or bishop or because there is a scarcity of Spiritan priests. Through baptism there is a fundamental equality of the different members of the mystical body. We differ only in the different ministries or services that we undertake. A key issue is that of succession. When a work is in line with the charism and taken on by the Congregation, we need to plan for continuity. If not, when the “founder” goes the work ceases to exist. Continuity and replacement need to be dealt with in all Spiritan works.

The educational community – staff, teachers, facilitators, parents - are invited to *transmit the Spiritan vision and ethos* by their word and example. For this purpose Spiritans need to organize leadership training programs, talks and events that will create this awareness and spirit among all those involved. The selection and hiring of suitable people is a key issue here.

The most powerful factor in attracting vocations – religious and lay – to continue the work we do is the contact with Spiritans who live out their vocation in a coherent and joyous manner and

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are at the service of others. Contact with a community that lives the vision and ethos of the Spiritan charism is another important factor.

We need to form educators, by preparing specialized people, such as teachers and managers, for our formal educational works. But we also need to prepare competent people in the use of the non-formal approach that starts with peoples' lives and uses the inductive methodology. As in many situations we don't have a captive audience so we need facilitators capable of motivating people to participate in an on-going process where they have ownership and that leads to commitment. This non-formal educational approach is effective in both formal education and alternative educational works.

Today, everybody with less than 25 years of age was born in the new digital age of e-mail, Facebook, Yahoo Groups, Skype, You-Tube, Homepage, Blogs, Google, Flickr (photos), mobile phones, e.t.c. Young people are connected to each other on a continuous basis through these new media. In different virtual groups they discuss personal and social issues and pass on texts and photos that can have the effect of creating awareness and commitment. In our educational work we can use these new media as an important ally. It is important to keep the focus that all *our works exist to evangelize* while welcoming and respecting other traditions and faiths.

Guidelines, Initial Observations

New works are, frequently, the result of initiatives by individuals. These works may remain as individual projects or are taken on by the circumscription. Sometimes only the individual is interested in them and knows what is going on. The ideal is that educational projects be owned by all.

We need some guidelines for our educational works. What are the criteria for establishing works of the Congregation? It is important not to kill initiative, but at the same time the Congregation may be held responsible in certain circumstances if there are no guidelines. There may be financial, accounting, legal and work related questions that involve labor laws that need to be taken into account. What is the duty of the circumscription? Should we have a policy for the establishment of new educational works, of the registration of property? Should the General Chapter draw up new guidelines? How do you guarantee solidity without killing initiative?

The context and the challenges can be very different in developed countries and developing countries and for that reason

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it may be best to establish general guidelines on the level of the Congregation and allow each circumscription to establish its own policies. So we need guidelines on the following issues:

- The establishment of *new educational works* and mission statements for each educational work.
- *The training of personnel* for formal educational works such as schools and universities and also for alternative educational works that use a more inductive method of formation.
- *The exchange of personnel*. Sometimes there is a lack of personnel for a particular educational work but there are qualified personnel in other parts of the Congregation.
- *Funding and financial management and control*.
- *Contracts with dioceses* when we are asked to take over schools.

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Endnotes

¹Participants in the Rome meeting of July 3-9, 2011.